



# Diploma delayed, diploma denied

Woman who waited almost 40 years to complete high school must meet new rules to graduate from Franklin County High School

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Rexie Douglas waited nearly 40 years to don a cap and gown, walk across the stage and receive her high school diploma.

Her family planned a party to celebrate her accomplishments.

However, once again, a lack of credits prohibited Douglas from graduating. Only this time, she said it was not her fault. She had done everything right.

"It was devastating to me," Douglas said. "My family was so proud of me."

In 1966, Douglas was preparing to graduate from Franklin County High

School when she found out she was a half credit shy of the 18-credit requirement. Instead of returning to school or taking a summer course, she dropped out, married and raised three children.

However, she said something was missing. Out of the 10 children in her family, she was one of the few to never graduate. Even her employers told her to go back and earn her diploma or GED.

In November 2004, Douglas visited Thorn Hill Learning Center. She said since she was so close — only a half credit short — she would rather have a diploma than a GED.

"Being out of high school for almost 40 years was a big thing to me," Doug-

las said. "I kept thinking, 'I can't do it, I can't do it, I can't do it, but then I went to Thorn Hill and everyone was so helpful.'"

When Douglas first came to Thorn Hill, Instructor Barry Burkett called Franklin County Public Schools and found out a diploma would not be possible. He then called the Kentucky Department of Education which he said told him as long as the local board "grandfathered in" Douglas, she could graduate.

So a district employee agreed. Douglas completed her math credit Feb. 14.

See **DIPLOMA**, A7



# Diploma

(Continued from Page A1)

Deborah Wigginton, Franklin County director of student services, sent Douglas a letter Feb. 17 certifying that Douglas had completed the "necessary course requirements for issuance of a diploma of graduation from Franklin County High School."

Douglas worked for about three months to earn her credit only and said she thought she would be able to graduate because she had received confirmation. Then, in late May, a week before graduation, she found out she could not receive her diploma. She had to earn the full 27 credits like other 2005 Franklin County High School graduates.

She said she and her husband, Bill, were talking about graduation and called to find out where her diploma was. The central office said it was at Franklin County High School and Franklin County High School said it did not have a diploma for her — she was not eligible to graduate.

Burkett confirmed it later that night when he told her the district said Douglas did not have enough credits.

"He was really mad," Douglas said. "So was I. They told me I could graduate."

At that point, Douglas had not taken the GED test nor was she in the GED program because she was focusing on earning her diploma. So she could not walk with her fellow Thorn Hill graduates.

In 1966, Douglas only needed 18 credits to graduate. Until 2002, students were required to have at least 20 credits according to the Kentucky Department of Education requirements. After 2002, the state required all students to have at least 22 credits.

However, diplomas are awarded by school districts, not the state, so they set the criteria for graduation, said Michael Miller, Kentucky Department of Education director of the division of curriculum. Most districts require more than the minimum 22 credits.

Franklin County requires graduates to have 27 credits and eight semesters of attendance, including the last semester before graduation.

Students also have to have a certain number of courses in each core subject. To meet the new requirements, Douglas would have to take another English, another social studies and another science. Plus, she would need an arts and humanities course and some elec-

tives.

To finish out her high school career, Douglas took a math course instead of an elective, so she is closer to dream, but still is 8.5 credits short.

Burkett suggested the board award her credits for life experience — working 30 years and raising a family. However, he said sometimes school districts will not award more than 2 credits for work outside the school.

Districts can substitute higher-level courses for advanced students, such as requiring an accelerated math student to take higher-level math courses than those traditionally mandated, Miller said. Also, districts can substitute integrated courses that cover all of the concepts in the other required courses.

However, the only way a district can grant credit for life experience is if the school has performance-based credits, which Miller said no Kentucky schools, to his knowledge, have. For performance-based curricula, usually students need to take a test and do some sort of project to show off their skills in addition to their accumulated life experience, gained through working in

a co-op.

Normally, students returning to school go through the GED program, Miller said. He said it is rare that people go back to school to earn a diploma. Only if the student has been gone for a few years and only has to make up a few credits will they go for a diploma.

Many times students can enroll in courses online with the help of the district. The Kentucky Virtual High School was not designed for credit recovery, but rather to expand the curriculum in smaller schools, Miller said. However, students could use the program to make up credits.

Burkett wrote a letter May 25 to the board petitioning it to grant Douglas the remaining credits and explaining her situation. He sent it to the board via Superintendent Monte Chance, expecting the board to discuss the issue June 6 at its regular board meeting.

However, Chance did not take it to the board. Some board members said they had never even heard of the issue.

"I feel like Mr. Chance overstepped his boundaries," Burkett said. "If there should be anyone who is an advocate for students in the system, it should be the super-

intendent. It doesn't seem like Mr. Chance is picking up that torch. He is acting like it is too much trouble or he just has a lack of interest."

(Chance said he received the letter, from the county school board and his staff is now pursuing the matter. He added that the school is working through the Kentucky Department of Education to determine what can be done.)

When Thorn Hill Director Patty Crittenden sent Wigginton a message June 7 asking if Douglas' situation was discussed at the June 6 board meeting, Wigginton wrote back that the issue was not taken before the board.

"I did not know that was what you were waiting on," Wigginton said. "Mr. Chance does not want to make an exception because then you would have to make one for everyone. Therefore, Rexie will not receive her diploma, she may compete a GED. In the future, please be aware that anyone wanting to graduate after their class will have to have the current number of credits required from high school."

Wigginton said she is not the one to handle this matter. Maurice

Chappell, director of middle and secondary curriculum and instruction, has put in several calls to the Department of Education and is waiting for a call back to determine what the district can do.

Bill Douglas said he does not understand why someone would say everything was approved and send Douglas a letter saying she had completed all of her credits for graduation only to yank it away.

"If you make a decision while the boss is away, then the boss should stand behind you and that decision should stick," Bill Douglas said.

Plus, Douglas did not take the easy way out, Burkett said. She only needed a half credit. It could have been an elective, but she chose to take math instead, which was difficult for her.

"She busted her hump for three months and completed what takes most people a year in three months," Burkett said.

Douglas said she does not want a GED. She wants her diploma.

"I am going to fight for my diploma," Douglas said. "They said I could have it and I want it. I worked really hard for it and I feel really, really let down."